

The Gospel For Christians

I grew up under a steady diet of gospel preaching. By that I mean virtually every Sunday, no matter the text chosen, we got a message on why we needed to be saved, how to be saved, the danger of dying before being saved, and an invitation to get saved, usually accompanied by a dramatic altar call with several verses of an invitation hymn.

If memory serves, I got most of my Bible knowledge in Sunday School and youth group. We heard gospel from the pulpit. By the time I became an adolescent, I had pretty much tuned out—*gospel resistant*—been there, heard that.

When God finally saved me and called me to Bible College and then seminary, it would be fair to say that I developed a borderline contempt for the every-Sunday-gospel-preaching under which I grew up. I had a strong desire to learn but also to *teach* the Bible. My generation, the baby-boomers, like every generation that would follow us, was going to do things differently. We'd finally get it right. And we did—some things. But like all our reactions to what we inherited, we also neglected important spiritual truths and values.

Over the years, as my passion for Bible teaching matured, I have grown to appreciate the significance of the gospel for *Christians*, especially for Christians. I have come to understand how important it is to convince the already converted of our ongoing need for Christ. We need to hear the gospel and let its truths saturate the deepest recesses of our souls. We are saved by grace and we live by that same grace.

Several years ago Pastor Tim Keller wrote about why Christians need the gospel. Let me read you a few excerpts: ▶“The gospel shows us that our spiritual problem lies not only in failing to obey God, but also in relying on our obedience to make us fully acceptable to God, ourselves and others. Every kind of character flaw comes from this natural impulse to be our own savior through our performance and achievement. ▶On the one hand, proud and disdainful personalities come from basing your identity on your performance and thinking you are succeeding.

But on the other hand, discouraged and self-loathing personalities also come from basing your identity on your performance and thinking you are failing.

▶ Belief in the gospel is not just the way to enter the kingdom of God; it is the way to address every obstacle and grow in every aspect...

So we can say that we are more wicked than we ever dared believe, but more loved and accepted in Christ than we ever dared hope at the very same time. ▶ This creates a radical new dynamic for personal growth. It means that the more you see your own flaws and sins, the more precious, electrifying, and amazing God's grace appears to you. But on the other hand, the more aware you are of God's grace and acceptance in Christ, the more able you are to drop your denials and self-defenses and admit the true dimensions and character of your sin" (Tim Keller, April 18, 2010 post on Reformationtheology.com site).

The whole of our Christian life and experience is rooted in and flows out of the gospel—God's grace to us in Christ!

The Apostle Paul was fond of reminding churches of how the gospel had made a difference in their lives. He would point back to their former lives—how they lived before Christ—and then show the dramatic change Jesus made. Listen to how he does this with the Colossians:

▶ "And you, who *once* were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has *now* reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ▶ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister" (Colossians 1:21-23 ESV).

How does Paul describe our lives before coming to faith? ▶ We were alienated from God—estranged from him—and hostile to him in our thinking because of the evil things we did. Most of the time our hostility simmered below the surface. Outwardly we may have viewed God with indifference. He was apart from us, malleable to our will when we needed him; a threat to our wills when he crossed us.

We have talked about this before. In spite of our protests to the contrary, when it comes right down to it we stiffened adversarially at the thought of God holding us accountable for our actions; at God daring to tell us we ought not do what we want to do.

We rebelled against God's "No!" and refused God's "Yes!" At the same time we were terrified of being exposed before God, and that fear produced resentment.

That resentment shows up not only against God. It spills over against *every* authority in our lives: our parents, our teachers, law enforcement officers, our coaches, our bosses, even our mates.


It blossoms and flourishes in the ugly conceit that only I have the right to choose—to determine what is best for me. I will be master of my fate, captain of my soul.

Bible scholar Charles Cranfield made this observation about human antagonism toward God: ▶“Fallen man’s fierce hostility to God is the response of his egotism...to God’s claim to his allegiance. Determined to assert himself, to assert his independence, to be the center of his own life, to be his own god, he cannot help but hate the real God whose very existence gives the lie to all his self-assertion. His hatred of God and his rebellion against God’s claims upon him expressed in God’s law are inseparable from each other.”

I know how strange this sounds to modern ears. It’s not something that is immediately and everywhere apparent and nothing in our world prepares us to think in such categories. I don’t know very many people who would readily acknowledge their animosity at God. But push the right buttons and the fierce self-reliance and self-determination that is in every human heart will show itself.

Even for Christians, the hostility and alienation that indelibly marked us before Jesus, that describes our pre-Christian, characteristic posture toward God, still works in us. We still feel a stubborn resistance when God calls us to an obedience we don’t like. We’re not glorified yet, so were not yet wholly free from those sinful reactions.

But—things have changed substantially!

Look at verse 22:  “And you, who *once* were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him...”

Our translators drop something to smooth out the English reading. Paul included a marvelous adversative showing the stark contrast between our former lives and the present: “And you *were...but now.*”

You were...but now! What wonderful words! All of us who trust Christ are “Used to Be’s!” Paul camps on this in his letters. We *used to be* alienated from God and enemies with God; we *used to be* dead in our trespasses and sins; we *used to be* unrighteous and unqualified for God’s Kingdom and presence; we *used to be* separated from Christ; having no hope and without God in the world. We used to be all that, *but now...!*

What’s the “but now” in Colossians? We have been reconciled to God by the sacrifice of Jesus’ body on the cross. **Because of what the incarnate Son of God did on our behalf, we have received a new reality that shapes our identity.** Jesus will one day present us to his heavenly Father as holy ones, blameless ones, people who are above reproach, against whom no charge of wrong-doing can be brought.

That destiny transforms our present. We are divine works-in-progress. We are becoming holy by the sanctifying work of God’s Holy Spirit in our hearts now. That same Spirit is cleaning up our habits and values, actions and attitudes, all the blameworthy moral blemishes that pollute our lives. Even now God’s Spirit is working in us to produce the obedience of faith. We are in Christ and not even Satan, the accuser of believers who accuses us before God day and night, is able to hang blame on us before the Father. Jesus has absorbed all the blame into himself. We are Used-to-Be’s who are, in Christ, works in progress. Now he stands at God’s right hand as our advocate, our defense attorney pleading his own death as the payment for the just condemnation we deserve.

The process of becoming holy isn’t finished in this life. We’re not glorified; not complete; not perfect. But not who we used to be—not by a long shot!

When Paul wrote the Romans, he reminded them: “By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh...” (Romans 8:3 ESV). The Apostle Peter put it this way: “He himself bore our sins in his *body* on the tree...” (1 Peter 2:24 ESV).

Jesus carried the whole weight of human sin in his physical body upon the cross. He absorbed the whole load of our condemnation into himself, the entire shame-filled record of human depravity and rebellion.

Songwriters Keith and Kristyn Getty capture this so well in their hymn, *In Christ Alone*:

▶ “In Christ alone, Who took on flesh, Fullness of God in helpless babe!
This gift of love and righteousness,
Scorned by the ones He came to save.

Till on that cross as Jesus died, The wrath of God was satisfied;
For ev’ry sin on Him was laid—Here in the death of Christ I live.”

Jesus received in himself, in his own physical body, the just penalty you deserved because your sin and guilt in order to bring you back to God. It is impossible to overstate the enormity and significance of what happened there.

That reconciliation is found in Christ alone—and no other! You can’t add to what Jesus did. You can’t improve on it. Jesus has already accomplished your full and complete reconciliation with the Father.

Paul drives this home with the Colossians because false teachers had insinuated that what Jesus did wasn’t enough. They promised secrets and mysteries and prescribed harsh disciplines of the body that pretended to offer something beyond than the simplistic gospel of reconciliation. In their teaching, Jesus had become little more than a nice beginning, the ABC’s of God, so to speak.

Paul says, absolutely not! Jesus is the whole package, A-Z—*Alpha-Omega*! We need Jesus Christ and him crucified to enter into eternal life and to live that life every day.

That doesn’t mean there isn’t more to learn about what it means to follow Christ, no further steps of growth in obedience and spiritual maturity. It does mean there is no growth, no maturity, no deeper work of God in us that isn’t grounded in the cross, that leaves Christ behind.

We face voices similar to those false teachers in our own day. We have men and women who suggest that trusting Jesus is fine as a beginning, but if you really want to know God, you have to learn the disciplines and rigors of obedience. And they are so close to being right.

Here's the twist: some preach salvation by grace through faith, but after that spiritual growth is on you. God has standards and real Christians toe the line! Such as these define Christian living with lists of what good Christians do and don't do and they are ingenious at coming up with new and original ways to point out failures in your life. Your *performance* determines your spirituality, your destiny, and your acceptability with God.

The cross isn't enough. After we're saved it's up to us if we have any hope of pleasing God in this life.

Paul brings us back to reality. Jesus did everything we need to bring us back to God when in his body on the cross he bore the penalty for our sin. End of story. We are complete in Jesus. We were saved by the grace of Christ and we live our lives by the same enabling grace of Christ by his Spirit. Paul will continue to unpack the implications of that in the rest of the book.

But listen how he ends this paragraph: ▶ "...*if indeed* you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister."

The "if" gets our attention, and frankly, it scares us. We wonder if there is a possibility that we could lose our salvation. What if we don't continue in the faith? What if we do drift away from the hope of the gospel of reconciliation?

I don't think Paul is trying to answer our questions about the certainty of our salvation, what we call "the preservation of the saints," or "eternal security." His point rather seems to be simply that apart from what Jesus did on the cross, there is no hope at all. Leave the cross behind and you are left with nothing.

It is a warning to accept no substitutes. Abandon Christ and you lose everything. You might as well pack it in and go home.

There is one, true, orthodox, apostolic gospel: Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. In his physical body—his flesh—on the cross, Jesus bore God’s judgement against our sins—**all** our sins—in order to restore us to the Father. In Christ *alone*, our hope is found.

Brothers and Sisters, as followers of Jesus we are Used to Be’s who have been reconciled to God, forgiven, and infused with hope. Jesus is all we need.

The grace of Christ is more than our “get out of jail free” card. It is our life. As we see God working his transformation in us, we swell not with pride, but with humble gratitude that overflows with thanksgiving, praise and worship. And when we stumble and fall flat on our face, that same grace that saved us meets our repentance and confession with forgiveness and cleansing. It lifts up our heads and becomes even more precious.

We have much to learn about the life of faith that takes us beyond the first principles of the Gospel, but we never leave the Gospel behind. If it ever ceases to “electrify and amaze” us, we need to get on our knees, recall before God our used-to-be life, and preach the gospel to our own souls all over again.

“...continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, [never shift] from the hope of the gospel...” It is our anchor, our rock, our cornerstone.

Never get over it!

Benediction:

“Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” (Jude 1:24-25).